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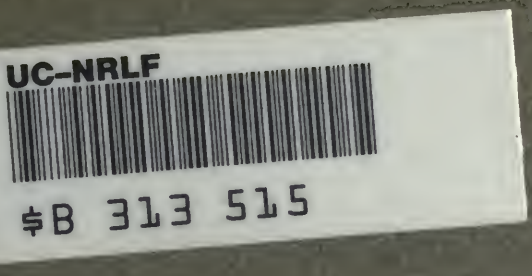

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MOLIÈR.

BY

WM. H. PRESCOTT.

L. D. Lyle

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HENRY MORSE STEPHENS

MOLIÈRE.

THE French surpass every other nation, indeed all the other nations of Europe put together, in the amount and excellence of their memoirs. Whence comes this manifest superiority? The important Collection relating to the History of France, commencing as early as the thirteenth century, forms a basis of civil history, more authentic, circumstantial, and satisfactory to an intelligent inquirer than is to be found among any other people; and the multitude of biographies, personal anecdotes, and similar scattered notices, which have appeared in France during the two last centuries, throw a flood of light on the social habits and general civilization of the period in which they were written. The Italian histories (and every considerable city in Italy, says Tiraboschi, had its historian as early as the thirteenth century) are fruitful only in wars, massacres, treasonable conspiracies, or diplomatic intrigues, matters that affect the tranquility of the state. The rich body of Spanish chronicles, which maintain an unbroken succession from the reign of Alphonso the Wise to that of Philip the Second, are scarcely more personal or interesting in their details, unless it be in reference to the sovereign and his immediate court. Even the English, in their memoirs and autobiographies of the last century, are too exclusively confined to topics of public notoriety, as the only subject worthy of record, or which can excite a general interest in their readers. Not so with the French. The most frivolous details assume in their eyes an importance, when they can be made illustrative of an eminent character; and even when they concern one of less note, they become sufficiently in-

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teresting, as just pictures of life and manners. Hence, instead of exhibiting their hero only as he appears on the great theater, they carry us along with him into retirement, or into those social circles where, stripped of his masquerade dress, he can indulge in all the natural gayety of his heart—in those frivolities and follies which display the real character much better than all his premeditated wisdom; those little nothings, which make up so much of the sum of French memoirs, but which, however amusing, are apt to be discarded by their more serious English neighbors as something derogatory to their hero. Where shall we find a more lively portraiture of that interesting period, when feudal barbarism began to fade away before the civilized institutions of modern times, than in Philip de Comines' sketches of the courts of France and Burgundy in the latter half of the fifteenth century? Where a more nice development of the fashionable intrigues, the corrupt Machiavelian politics which animated the little coteries, male and female, of Paris, under the regency of Anne of Austria, than in the Memoirs of De Retz? To say nothing of the vast amount of similar contributions in France during the last century, which, in the shape of letters and anecdotes, as well as memoirs, have made us as intimately acquainted with the internal movements of society in Paris, under all its aspects, literary, fashionable, and political, as if they had passed in review before our own eyes.

The French have been remarked for their excellence in narrative ever since the times of the *fabliaux* and the old Norman romances. Somewhat of their success in this way may be imputed to the structure of their language, whose general currency, and whose peculiar fitness for prose composition, have been noticed from a very early period. Brunetto Latini, the master of Dante, wrote his *Tesoro* in French, in preference to his own tongue, as far back as the middle of the thirteenth century, on the ground "that its speech was the most universal and most delectable of all

the dialects of Europe." And Dante asserts in his treatise "on Vulgar Eloquence," that "the superiority of the French consists in its adaptation, by means of its facility and agreeableness, to narratives in prose." Much of the wild, artless grace, the *naïveté*, which characterized it in its infancy, has been gradually polished away by fastidious critics, and can scarcely be said to have survived Marot and Montaigne. But the language has gained considerably in perspicuity, precision, and simplicity of construction, to which the jealous labors of the French Academy must be admitted to have contributed essentially. This simplicity of construction, refusing those complicated inversions so usual in the other languages of the Continent, and its total want of prosody, though fatal to poetical purposes, have greatly facilitated its acquisition to foreigners, and have made it a most suitable vehicle for conversation. Since the time of Louis the Fourteenth, accordingly, it has become the language of the courts, and the popular medium of communication in most of the countries of Europe. Since that period, too, it has acquired a number of elegant phrases and familiar turns of expression, which have admirably fitted it for light, popular narrative, like that which enters into memoirs, letter-writing, and similar kinds of composition.

The character and situation of the writers themselves may account still better for the success of the French in this departmant. Many of them, as Joinville, Sully, Comines, De Thou, Rochefoucault, Torcy, have been men of rank and education, the counsellors or the friends of princes, acquiring from experience a shrewd perception of the character and of the forms of society. Most of them have been familiarized in those polite circles which, in Paris more than any other capital, seem to combine the love of dissipation and fashion with a high relish for intellectual pursuits. The state of society in France, or, what is the same thing, in Paris, is admirably suited to the purposes of the memoir-writer. The cheerful,

gregarious temper of the inhabitants, which mingles all ranks in the common pursuit of pleasure; the external polish, which scarcely deserts them in the commission of the grossest violence; the influence of the women, during the last two centuries, far superior to that of the sex among any other people, and exercised alike on matters of taste, politics, and letters; the gallantry and licentious intrigues so usual in the higher classes of this gay metropolis, and which fill even the life of a man of letters, so stagnant in every other country, with stirring and romantic adventure; all these, we say, make up a rich and varied panorama, that can hardly fail of interest under the hand of the most common artists.

Lastly, the vanity of the French may be considered as another cause of their success in this kind of writing; a vanity which leads them to disclose a thousand amusing particulars, which the reserve of an Englishman, and perhaps his pride, would discard as altogether unsuitable to the public ear. This vanity, it must be confessed, however, has occasionally seduced their writers, under the garb of confessions and secret memoirs, to make such a disgusting exposure of human infirmity as few men would be willing to admit, even to themselves.

The best memoirs of late produced in France seem to have assumed somewhat of a novel shape. While they are written with the usual freedom and vivacity, they are fortified by a body of references and illustrations that attest an unwonted degree of elaboration and research. Such are those of Rousseau, La Fontaine, and Molière, lately published. The last of these, which forms the subject of our article, is a compilation of all that has ever been recorded of the life of Molière. It is executed in an agreeable manner, and has the merit of examining, with more accuracy than has been hitherto done, certain doubtful points in his biography, and of assembling together in a convenient form what has before been diffused over a great variety of surface. But, however familiar

most of these particulars may be to the countrymen of Molière (by far the greatest comic genius in his own nation, and, in very many respects, inferior to none in any other), they are not so current elsewhere as to lead us to imagine that some account of his life and literary labors would be altogether unacceptable to our readers.

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (Molière) was born in Paris, January 15, 1622. His father was an upholsterer, as his grandfather had been before him; and the young Poquelin was destined to exercise the same hereditary craft, to which, indeed, he served an apprenticeship until the age of fourteen. In this determination his father was confirmed by the office which he had obtained for himself, in connection with his original vocation, of *valet de chambre* to the king, with the promise of a reversion of it to his son on his own decease. The youth accordingly received only such a meager elementary education as was usual with the artisans of that day. But a secret consciousness of his own powers convinced him that he was destined by nature for higher purposes than that of quilting sofas and hanging tapestry. His occasional presence at the theatrical representations of the *Hôtel de Bourgogne* is said also to have awakened in his mind, at this period, a passion for the drama. He therefore solicited his father to assist him in obtaining more liberal instruction; and when the latter at length yielded to the repeated entreaties of his son, it was with the reluctance of one who imagines that he is spoiling a good mechanic in order to make a poor scholar. He was accordingly introduced into the Jesuits' College of Clermont, where he followed the usual course of study for five years with diligence and credit. He was fortunate enough to pursue the study of philosophy under the direction of the celeberated Gassendi, with his fellow-pupils, Chapelle, the poet, afterward his intimate friend, and Bernier, so famous subsequently for his travels in the East, but who, on his return, had the misfortune to lose the favor of Louis the Fourteenth

by replying to him, that "of all the countries he had ever seen, he preferred Switzerland."

On the completion of his studies in 1641, he was required to accompany the king, then Louis the Thirteenth, in his capacity of *valet de chambre* (his father being detained in Paris by his infirmities), on an excursion to the south of France. This journey afforded him the opportunity of becoming intimately acquainted with the habits of the court, as well as those of the provinces, of which he afterward so repeatedly availed himself in his comedies. On his return he commenced the study of the law, and had completed it, it would appear, when his old passion for the theater revived with increased ardor, and, after some hesitation, he determined no longer to withstand the decided impulse of his genius. He associated himself with one of those city companies of players with which Paris had swarmed since the days of Richelieu—a minister who aspired after the same empire in the republic of letters which he had so long maintained over the state, and whose ostentatious patronage eminently contributed to develop that taste for dramatic exhibition which has distinguished his countrymen ever since.

The consternation of the elder Poquelin, on receiving the intelligence of his son's unexpected determination, may be readily conceived. It blasted at once all the fair promise which the rapid progress the latter had made in his studies justified him in forming, and it degraded him to an unfortunate profession, esteemed at that time even more lightly in France than it had been in other countries. The humiliating dependance of the comedian on the popular favor, the daily exposure of his person to the caprice and insults of an unfeeling audience, the numerous temptations incident to his precarious and unsettled life, may furnish abundant objections to this profession in the mind of every parent. But in France, to all these objections were superadded others of a graver cast, founded on religion. The clergy there, alarmed at the rapidly-increasing taste for dramatic

exhibitions, openly denounced these elegant recreations as an insult to the Deity; and the pious father anticipated, in this preference of his son, his spiritual no less than his temporal perdition. He actually made an earnest remonstrance to him to this effect, through the intervention of one of his friends, who, however, instead of converting the youth, was himself persuaded to join the company then organizing under his direction. But his family were never reconciled to his proceeding; and even at a later period of his life, when his splendid successes in his new career had shown how rightly he had understood the character of his own genius, they never condescended to avail themselves of the freedom of admission to his theater, which he repeatedly proffered. M. Bret, his editor, also informs us, that he had himself seen a genealogical tree in the possession of the descendants of this same family, in which the name of Molière was not even admitted! Unless it were to trace their connection with so illustrious a name, what could such a family want of a genealogical tree! It was from a deference to these scruples that our hero annexed to his patronymic the name of Molière, by which alone he has been recognized by posterity.

During the three following years he continued playing in Paris, until the turbulent regency of Anne of Austria withdrew the attention of the people from the quiet pleasures of the drama to those of civil broil and tumult. Molière then quitted the capital for the south of France. From this period, 1646 to 1658, his history presents few particulars worthy of record. He wandered with his company through the different provinces, writing a few farces which have long since perished, performing at the principal cities, and, wherever he went, by his superior talent withdrawing the crowd from every other spectacle to the exhibition of his own. During this period, too, he was busily storing his mind with those nice observations of men and manners so essential to the success of the dramatist, and which were to ripen there until a

proper time for their development should arrive. At the town of Pezénas they still show an elbow-chair of Molière's (as at Montpelier they show the gown of Rabelais), in which the poet, it is said, ensconced in a corner of a barber's shop, would sit for the hour together, silently watching the air, gestures, and grimaces of the village politicians, who, in those days, before coffee-houses were introduced into France, used to congregate in this place of resort. The fruits of this study may be easily discerned in those original draughts of character from the middling and lower classes with which his pieces everywhere abound.

In the south of France he met with the Prince of Conti, with whom he had contracted a friendship at the college of Clermont, and who received him with great hospitality. The prince pressed upon him the office of his private secretary; but, fortunately for letters, Molière was constant in his devotion to the drama, assigning as his reason that "the occupation was of too serious a complexion to suit his taste; and that, though he might make a passable author, he should make a very poor secretary." Perhaps he was influenced in this refusal, also, by the fate of the preceding incumbent, who had lately died of a fever, in consequence of a blow from the fire-tongs, which his highness, in a fit of ill humor, had given him on the temple. However this may be, it was owing to the good offices of the prince that he obtained access to Monsieur, the only brother of Louis the Fourteenth, and father of the celebrated regent, Philip of Orleans, who, on his return to Paris in 1658, introduced him to the king, before whom, in the month of October following, he was allowed, with his company, to perform a tragedy of Corneille's and one of his own farces.

His little corps was now permitted to establish itself under the title of the "Company of Monsieur," and the theater of the Petit-Bourbon was assigned as the place for its performances. Here, in the course of a few weeks, he brought out his

Etourdi and *Le Dépit Amoureux*, comedies in verse and in five acts, which he had composed during his provincial pilgrimage, and which, although deficient in an artful *liaison* of scenes and in probability of incident, exhibit, particularly the last, those fine touches of the ridiculous, which revealed the future author of the *Tartuffe* and the *Misanthrope*. They indeed found greater favor with the audience than some of his later pieces; for in the former they could only compare him with the wretched models that had preceded him, while in the latter they were to compare him with himself.

In the ensuing year Molière exhibited his celebrated farce of *Les Précieuses Ridicules;* a piece in only one act, but which, by its inimitable satire, effected such a revolution in the literary taste of his countrymen as has been accomplished by few words of a more imposing form, and which may be considered as the basis of the dramatic glory of Molière, and the dawn of good comedy in France. This epoch was the commencement of that brilliant period in French literature which is so well known as the age of Louis the Fourteenth; and yet it was distinguished by such a puerile, meretricious taste, as is rarely to be met with except in the incipient stages of civilization, or in its last decline. The cause of this melancholy perversion of intellect is mainly imputable to the influence of a certain *coterie* of wits, whose rank, talents, and successful authorship had authorized them, in some measure, to set up as the arbiters of taste and fashion. This choice assembly, consisting of the splenetic Rochefoucault; the *belesprit* Voiture; Balzac, whose letters afford the earliest example of numbers in French prose; the lively and licentious Bussy; Rabutin; Chapelain, who, as a wit has observed, might still have had a reputation had it not been for his "Pucelle;" the poet Bensérade; Ménage, and others of less note; together with such eminent women as Madame Lafayette, Mademoiselle Scudéri (whose eternal romances, the delight of her own age, have been the despair of every other), and

even the elegant Sévigné, was accustomed to hold its *réunions* principally at the *Hôtel de Rambouillet*, the residence of the marchioness of that name, and which, from this circumstance, has acquired such ill-omened notoriety in the history of letters.

Here they were wont to hold the most solemn discussions on the most frivolous topics, but especially on matters relating to gallantry and love, which they debated with all the subtility and metaphysical refinement that centuries before had characterized the romantic Courts of Love in the south of France. All this was conducted in an affected jargon, in which the most common things, instead of being called by their usual names, were signified by ridiculous periphrases; which, while it required neither wit nor ingenuity to invent them, could have had no other merit, even in their own eyes, than that of being unintelligible to the vulgar. To this was superadded a tone of exaggerated sentiment, and a ridiculous code of etiquette, by which the intercourse of these *exclusives* was to be regulated with each other, all borrowed from the absurd romances of Calprenede and Scudéri. Even the names of the parties underwent a metamorphosis, and Madame de Rambouillet's christian name of *Catherine* being found too trite and unpoetical, was converted into *Arthénice*, by which she was so generally recognized as to be designated by it in Fléchier's eloquent funeral oration on her daughter.* These insipid affectations, which French critics are fond of imputing to an Italian influence, savor quite as much of the Spanish *cultismo* as of the *concetti* of the former nation, and may be yet more fairly referred to the same false principles of taste which distinguished the French Pleiades of the sixteenth century, and the more ancient compositions

*How comes La Harpe to fall into the error of supposing that Fléchier referred to Madame Montausier by this epithet of *Arthénice?* The bishop's style in this passage is as unequivocal as usual. See *Cours de Littérature*, etc., tome vi., p. 167.

of their Provençal ancestors. Dictionaries were compiled, and treatises written illustrative of this precious vocabulary; all were desirious of being initiated into the mysteries of so elegant a science: even such men as Corneille and Bossuet did not disdain to frequent the saloons where it was studied; the spirit of imitation, more active in France than in other countries, took possession of the provinces; every village had its coterie of *précieuses* after the fashion of the capital, and a false taste and criticism threatened to infect the very sources of pure and healthful literature.

It was against this fashionable corruption that Molière aimed his wit in the little satire of the "Précieuses Ridicules," in which the valets of two noblemen are represented as aping their masters' tone of conversation for the purpose of imposing on two young ladies fresh from the provinces, and great admirers of the new style. The absurdity of these affectations is still more strongly relieved by the contemptuous incredulity of the father and servant, who do not comprehend a word of them. By this process Molière succeeded both in exposing and degrading these absurd pretensions, as he showed how opposite they were to common sense, and how easily they were to be acquired by the most vulgar minds. The success was such as might have been anticipated on an appeal to popular feeling, where nature must always triumph over the arts of affectation. The piece was welcomed with enthusiastic applause, and the disciples of the *Hôtel Rambouillet*, most of whom were present at the first exhibition, beheld the fine fabric which they had been so painfully constructing brought to the ground by a single blow. "And these follies," said Ménage to Chapelain, "which you and I see so finely criticised here, are what we have been so long admiring. We must go home and burn our idols." "Courage, Molière," cried an old man from the pit; "this is genuine comedy." The price of the seats was doubled from the time of the second representation. Nor were the effects of the satire

merely transitory. It converted an epithet of praise into one of reproach; and a *femme précieuse*, a *style précieux*, a *ton précieux*, once so much admired, have ever since been used only to signify the most ridiculous affectation.

There was, in truth, however, quite as much luck as merit in this success of Molière, whose production exhibits no finer raillery or better sustained dialogue than are to be found in many of his subsequent pieces. It assured him, however, of his own strength, and disclosed to him the mode in which he should best hit the popular taste. "I have no occasion to study Plautus or Terence any longer," said he; "I must henceforth study the world." The world, accordingly, was his study; and the exquisite models of character which it furnished him will last as long as it shall endure.

In 1660 he brought out the excellent comedy of the *Ecole des Maris*, and in the course of the same month, that of the *Fâcheux* in three acts—composed, learned, and performed within the brief space of a fortnight; an expedition evincing the dexterity of the manager no less than that of the author. This piece was written at the request of Fouquet, superintendent of finances to Louis the Fourteenth, for the magnificent *fête* at Vaux, given by him to that monarch, and lavishly celebrated in the memoirs of the period, and with yet more elegance in a poetical epistle of La Fontaine to his friend De Maucroix. This minister had been intrusted with the principal care of the finances under Cardinal Mazarine, and had been continued in the same office by Louis the Fourteenth, on his own assumption of the government. The monarch, however, alarmed at the growing dilapidations of the revenue, requested from the superintendent an *exposé* of its actual condition, which, on receiving, he privately communicated to Colbert, the rival and successor of Fouquet. The latter, whose ordinary expenditure far exceeded that of any other subject in the kingdom, and who, in addition to immense sums

occasionally lost at play and daily squandered on his debaucheries, is said to have distributed in pensions more than four millions of livres annually, thought it would be an easy matter to impose on a young and inexperienced prince, who had hitherto shown himself more devoted to pleasure than business, and accordingly gave in false returns, exaggerating the expenses, and diminishing the actual receipts of the treasury. The detection of this peculation determined Louis to take the first occasion of dismissing his powerful minister; but his ruin was precipitated and completed by the discovery of an indiscreet passion for Madame de la Villière, whose fascinating graces were then beginning to acquire for her that ascendency over the youthful monarch which has since condemned her name to such unfortunate celebrity. The portrait of this lady, seen in the apartments of the favorite on the occasion to which we have adverted, so incensed Louis, that he would have had him arrested on the spot but for the seasonable intervention of the queen-mother, who reminded him that Fouquet was his host. It was for this *fête* at Vaux, whose palace and ample domains, covering the extent of three villages, had cost their proprietor the sum, almost incredible for that period, of eighteen million livres, that Fouquet put in requisition all the various talents of the capital, the dexterity of its artists, and the invention of its finest poets. He was particularly lavish in his preparations for the dramatic portion of the entertainment. Le Brun passed for a while from his victories of Alexander to paint the theatrical decorations; Torelli was employed to contrive the machinery; Pelisson furnished the prologue, much admired in its day, and Molière his comedy of the *Fâcheux*.

This piece, the hint for which may have been suggested by Horace's ninth satire, *Ibam forte viâ Sacrâ*, is an amusing caricature of the various *bores* that infest society, rendered the more vexatious by their intervention at the very moment when a young lover is hastening to the place of

assignation with his mistress. Louis the Fourteenth, after the performance, seeing his master of the hunts near him, M. Soyecour, a personage remarkably absent, and inordinately devoted to the pleasures of the chase, pointed him out to Molière as an original whom he had omitted to bring upon his canvas. The poet took the hint, and the following day produced an excellent scene, where this Nimrod is made to go through the *technics* of his art, in which he had himself, with great complaisance, instructed the mischievous satirist, who had drawn him into a conversation for that very purpose on the preceding evening.

This play was the origin of the *comédie-ballet*, afterward so popular in France. The residence at Vaux brought Molière more intimately in contact with the king and the court than he had before been; and from this time may be dated the particular encouragement which he ever after received from this prince, and which eventually enabled him to triumph over the malice of his enemies. A few days after this magnificent entertainment, Fouquet was thrown into prison, where he was suffered to langish the remainder of his days, "which," says the historian from whom we have gathered these details, "he terminated *in sentiments of the most sincere piety:*"* a termination by no means uncommon in France with that class of persons, of either sex, respectively, who have had the misfortune to survive their fortune or their beauty.

In February, 1662, Molière formed a matrimonial connection with Mademoiselle Béjart, a young comedian of his company, who had been educated under his own eye, and whose wit and captivating graces had effectually ensnared the poet's heart, but for which he was destined to perform doleful penance the remainder of his life. The disparity of their ages, for the lady was

*Histoire de la Vie, etc., de La Fontaine, par M. Valckenaer. Paris, 1824.

hardly seventeen, might have afforded in itself a sufficient objection; and he had no reason to flatter himself that she would remain uninfected by the pernicious example of the society in which she had been educated, and of which he himself was not altogether an immaculate member. In his excellent comedy of the *Ecole des Femmes*, brought forward the same year, the story turns upon the absurdity of an old man's educating a young woman for the purpose, at some future time, of marrying her; which wise plan is defeated by the unseasonable apparition of a young lover, who in five minutes undoes what it had cost the veteran so many years to contrive. The pertinency of this moral to the poet's own situation shows how much easier it is to talk wisely than to act so.

This comedy, popular as it was on its representation, brought upon the head of its author a tempest of parody, satire, and even slander, from those of his own craft who were jealous of his unprecedented success, and from those literary *petits-maîtres* who still smarted with the stripes inflicted on them in some of his previous performances. One of this latter class, incensed at the applauses bestowed upon the piece on the night of its first representation, indignantly exclaimed, *Ris donc, parterre! ris donc!* "Laugh then, pit, if you will!" and immediately quitted the theater.

Molière was not slow in avenging himself of these interested criticisms, by means of a little piece entitled *La Critique de l' Ecole des Femmes*, in which he brings forward the various objections made to his comedy, and ridicules them with unsparing severity. These objections appear to have been chiefly of a verbal nature. A few such familiar phrases as *Tarte à la crême*, *Enfans par l'oreille*, etc., gave particular offence to the purists of that day, and, in the prudish spirit of French criticism, have since been condemned by Voltaire and La Harpe as unworthy of comedy. One of the personages introduced into the *Critique* is a marquis, who,

when repeatedly interrogated as to the nature of his objections to the comedy, has no other answer to make than by his eternal *Tarte à la crême.* The Duc de Feuillade, a coxcomb of little brains but great pretension, was the person generally supposed to be here intended. The peer, unequal to an encounter of wits with his antagonist, resorted to a coarser remedy. Meeting Molière one day in the gallery at Versailles, he advanced as if to embrace him; a civility which the great lords of that day occasionally condescended to bestow upon their inferiors. As the unsuspecting poet inclined himself to receive the salute, the duke, seizing his head between his hands, rubbed it briskly against the buttons of his coat, repeating, at the same time, *Tarte à la crême, Monsieur, tarte à la crême.* The king, on receiving intelligence of this affront, was highly indignant, and reprimanded the duke with great asperity. He at the same time encouraged Molière to defend himself with his own weapons; a privilege of which he speedily availed himself, in a caustic little satire in one act, entitled *Impromptu de Versailles.* "The marquis," he says in this piece, "is nowadays the droll (*le plaisant*) of the comedy; and as our ancestors always introduced a jester to furnish mirth for the audience, so we must have recourse to some ridiculous marquis to divert them."

It is obvious that Molière could never have maintained this independent attitude if he had not been protected by the royal favor. Indeed, Louis was constant in giving him this protection; and when, soon after this period, the character of Molière was blackened by the vilest imputations, the monarch testified his conviction of his innocence by publicly standing godfather to his child—a tribute of respect equally honorable to the prince and the poet. The king, moreover, granted him a pension of a thousand livres annually; and to his company, which henceforth took the title of "comedians of the king," a pension of seven thousand. Our author received his pension, as one of a long list of men of letters, who experienced a similar

bounty from the royal hand. The curious estimate exhibited in this document of the relative merits of these literary stipendiaries affords a striking evidence that the decrees of contemporaries are not unfrequently to be reversed by posterity. The obsolete Chapelain is there recorded "as the greatest French poet who has ever existed;" in consideration of which, his stipend amounted to three thousand livres, while Boileau's name, for which his satires had already secured an imperishable existence, is not even noticed! It should be added, however, on the authority of Boileau, that Chapelain himself had the principal hand in furnishing this apocryphal scale of merit to the minister.

In the month of September, 1665, Molière produced his *L'Amour Médecin, comédie-ballet*, in three acts, which, from the time of its conception to that of its performance, consumed only five days. This piece, although displaying no more than his usual talent for caustic raillery, is remarkable as affording the earliest demonstration of those direct hostilities upon the medical faculty, which he maintained at intervals during the rest of his life, and which he may be truly said to have died in maintaining. In this he followed the example of Montaigne, who, in particular, devotes one of the longest chapters in his work to a *tirade* against the profession, which he enforces by all the ingenuity of his wit, and his usual wealth of illustration. In this, also, Molière was subsequently imitated by Le Sage, as every reader of Gil Blas will readily call to mind. Both Montaigne and Le Sage, however, like most other libellers of the healing art, were glad to have recourse to it in the hour of need.

Not so with Molière. His satire seems to have been without affectation. Though an habitual valetudinarian, he relied almost wholly on the temperance of his diet for the re-establishment of his health. "What use do you make of your physician?" said the king to him one day. "We chat together, sire," said the poet; "he gives me his prescriptions; I never follow them, and so I get well."

An ample apology for this infidelity may be found in the state of the profession at that day, whose members affected to disguise a profound ignorance of the true principles of science under a pompous exterior, which, however it might impose upon the vulgar, could only bring them into deserved discredit with the better portion of the community. The physicians of that time are described as parading the streets of Paris on mules, dressed in a long robe and band, holding their conversation in bad Latin, or, if they condescended to employ the vernacular, mixing it up with such a jargon of scholastic phrase and scientific *technics* as to render it perfectly unintelligible to vulgar ears. The following lines, cited by M. Taschereau, and written in good earnest at the time, seem to hit off most of these peculiarities.

"Affecter un air pédantesque,
Cracher du Grec et du Latin,
Longue perruque, habit grotesque,
De la fourrure et du satin,
Tout cela réuni fait presque
Ce qu'on appelle un médecin."*

In addition to these absurdities, the physicians of that period exposed themselves to still farther derision by the contrariety of their opinions, and the animosity with which they maintained them. The famous consultation in the case of Cardinal Mazarine was well known in its day; one of his four medical attendants affirming the seat of his disorder to be the liver, another the lungs, a third the spleen, and a fourth the mesentery. Molière's raillery, therefore, against empirics, in a profession where mistakes are so easily made, so difficult to be detected, and the only one in which they are irremediable, stands abundantly excused from the censures which have been heaped upon it. Its

*A gait and air somewhat pedantic,
And scarce to spit but Greek or Latin,
A long peruke and habit antic,
Sometimes of fur, sometimes of satin,
Form the receipt by which 'tis shown
How to make doctors *à la mode*.

effects were visible in the reform which, in his own time, it effected in their manners, if in nothing farther. They assumed the dress of men of the world, and gradually adopted the popular forms of communication; an essential step to improvement, since nothing cloaks ignorance and empiricism more effectually with the vulgar than an affected use of learned phrase and a technical vocabulary.

We are now arrived at that period of Molière's career when he composed his *Misanthrope*, a play which some critics have esteemed his masterpiece, and which all concur in admiring as one of the noblest productions of the modern drama. Its literary execution, too, of paramount importance in the eye of a French critic, is more nicely elaborated than in any other of the pieces of Molière, if we except the *Tartuffe*, and its didactic dialogue displays a maturity of thought equal to what is found in the best satires of Boileau. It is the very didactic tone of this comedy, indeed, which, combined with its want of eager, animating interest, made it less popular on its representation than some of his inferior pieces. A circumstance which occurred on the first night of its performance may be worth noticing. In the second scene of the first act, a man of fashion, it is well known, is represented as soliciting the candid opinion of *Alceste* on a sonnet of his own enditing, though he flies into a passion with him, five minutes after, for pronouncing an unfavorable judgment. This sonnet was so artfully constructed by Molière with those dazzling epigrammatic points most captivating to common ears, that the gratified audience were loud in their approbation of what they supposed intended in good faith by the author. How great was their mortification, then, when they heard Alceste condemn the whole as puerile, and fairly expose the false principles on which it had been constructed. Such a rebuke must have carried more weight with it than a volume of set dissertation, on the principles of taste.

Rousseau has bitterly inveighed against Molière for exposing to ridicule the hero of his *Misan-*

thrope, a high-minded and estimable character. It was told to the Duc de Montausier, well known for his austere virtue, that he was intended as the original of the character. Much offended, he attended a representation of the piece, but on returning, declared that "he dared hardly flatter himself the poet had intended him so great an honor." This fact, as has been well intimated by La Harpe, furnishes the best reply to Rousseau's invective.

The relations in which Molière stood with his wife at the time of the appearance of this comedy gave to the exhibition a painful interest. The levity and extravagance of this lady had for some time transcended even those liberal limits which were conceded at that day by the complaisance of a French husband, and they deeply affected the happiness of the poet. As he one day communicated the subject to his friend Chapelle, the latter strongly urged him to confine her person; a remedy much in vogue then for refractory wives, and one, certainly, if not more efficacious, at least more gallant than the "moderate flagellation" authorized by the English law. He remonstrated on the folly of being longer the dupe of her artifices. "Alas!" said the unfortunate poet to him, "you have never loved!" A separation, however, was at length agreed upon, and it was arranged that, while both parties occupied the same house, they should never meet except at the theater. The respective parts which they performed in this piece corresponded precisely with their respective situations: that of *Célimène*, a fascinating, capricious coquette, insensible to every remonstrance of her lover, and selfishly bent on the gratification of her own appetites; and that of *Alceste*, perfectly sensible of the duplicity of his mistress, whom he vainly hopes to reform, and no less so of the unworthiness of his own passion, from which he vainly hopes to extricate himself. The coincidences are too exact to be considered wholly accidental.

If Molière in his preceding pieces had hit the follies and fashionable absurdities of the age, in the *Tartuffe* he flew at still higher game, the most

odious of all vices, religious hypocrisy. The result showed that his shafts were not shot in the dark. The first three acts of the *Tartuffe*, the only ones then written, made their appearance at the memorable *fêtes* known under the name of "The Pleasures of the Enchanted Isle," given by Louis the Fourteenth at Versailles, in 1664, and of which the inquisitive reader may find a circumstantial narrative in the twenty-fifth chapter of Voltaire's history of that monarch. The only circumstance which can give them a permanent value with posterity is their having been the occasion of the earliest exhibition of this inimitable comedy. Louis the Fourteenth, who, notwithstanding the defects of his education, seems to have had a discriminating perception of literary beauty, was fully sensible of the merits of this production. The *Tartuffes*, however, who were present at the exhibition, deeply stung by the sarcasms of the poet, like the foul birds of night whose recesses have been suddenly invaded by a glare of light, raised a fearful cry against him, until Louis even, whose solicitude for the interests of the Church was nowise impaired by his own personal derelictions, complied with their importunities for imposing a prohibition on the pubic performance of the play.

It was, however, privately acted in the presence of Monsieur, and afterward of the great Condé. Copies of it were greedily circulated in the societies of Paris; and although their unanimous suffrage was an inadequate compensation to the author for the privations he incurred, it was sufficient to quicken the activity of the false zealots, who, under the mask of piety, assailed him with the grossest libels. One of them even ventured so far as to call upon the king to make a public example of him with fire and fagot; another declared that it would be an offence to the Diety to allow Molière, after such an enormity, "to participate in the sacraments, to be admitted to confession, or even to enter the precincts of a church, considering the anathemas which it had fulminated against the authors of indecent and sacrilegious spectacles!"

Soon after his sentence of prohibition, the king attended the performance of a piece entitled *Scaramouche Hermite*, a piece abounding in passages the most indelicate and profane. "What is the reason," said he, on retiring, to the Prince of Condé, "that the persons so sensibly scandalized at Molière's comedy take no umbrage at this?" "Because," said the prince, "the latter only attacks religion, while the former attacks themselves:" an answer which may remind one of a remark of Bayle in reference to the *Decameron*, which having been placed on the Index on account of its immorality, was, however, allowed to be published in an edition which converted the names of the ecclesiastics into those of laymen: "a concession," says the philosopher, "which shows the priests to have been much more solicitous for the interests of their own order than for those of heaven."

Louis, at length convinced of the interested motives of the enemies of the *Tartuffe*, yielded to the importunities of the public and removed his prohibition of its performance. It accordingly was represented, for the first time in public, in August, 1667, before an overflowing house, extended to its full complement of five acts, but with alterations of the names of the piece, the principal personages in it, and some of its most obnoxious passages. It was entitled *The Impostor*, and its hero was styled *Panulfe*. On the second evening of the performance, however, an interdict arrived from the president of the Parliament against the repetition of the performance; and, as the king had left Paris in order to join his army in Flanders, no immediate redress was to be obtained. It was not until two years later, 1669, that the *Tartuffe*, in its present shape, was finally allowed to proceed unmolested in its representations. It is scarcely necessary to add, that these were attended with the most brilliant success which its author could have anticipated, and to which the intrinsic merits of the piece, and the unmerited persecutions he had undergone, so well entitled him. Forty-four successive repre-

sentations were scarcely sufficient to satisfy the eager curiosity of the public: and his grateful company forced upon Molière a double share of the profits during every repetition of its performance for the remainder of his life. Posterity has confirmed the decision of his contemporaries, and it still remains the most admired comedy of the French theater, and will always remain so, says a native critic, "as long as taste and hypocrites shall endure in France."

We have been thus particular in our history of these transactions, as it affords one of the most interesting examples on record of undeserved persecution with which envy and party spirit have assailed a man of letters. No one of Molière's compositions is determined by a more direct moral aim; nowhere has he stripped the mask from vice with a more intrepid hand; nowhere has he animated his discourses with a more sound and practical piety. It should be added, in justice to the French clergy of that period, that the most eminent prelates at the court acknowledged the merits of this comedy, and were strongly in favor of its representation.

It is generally known that the amusing scene in the first act, where *Dorine* enlarges so eloquently on the good cheer which *Tartuffe* had made in the absence of his host, was suggested to Molière some years previous in Lorraine, by a circumstance which took place at the table of Louis the Fourteenth, whom Molière had accompanied in his capacity of *valet de chambre*. Perefixe, bishop of Rhodez, entering while the king was at his evening meal, during Lent, was invited by him to follow his example; but the bishop declined on the ground that he was accustomed to eat only once during the days of vigil and fast. The king, observing one of his attendants to smile, inquired of him the reason as soon as the prelate had withdrawn. The latter informed his master that he need be under no apprehensions for the health of the good bishop, as he himself had assisted at his dinner on that day, and then

recounted to him the various dishes which had been served up. The king, who listened with becoming gravity to the narration, uttered an exclamation of "Poor man!" at the specification of each new item, varying the tone of his exclamation in such a manner as to give it a highly comic effect. The humor was not lost upon our poet, who has transported the same ejaculations, with much greater effect, into the above-mentioned scene of his play. The king, who did not at first recognize the scource whence he had derived it, on being informed of it, was much pleased, if we may believe M. Taschereau, in finding himself even thus accidentally associated with the work of a man of genius.

In 1668 Molière brought forward his *Avare*, and in the following year his amusing comedy of the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, in which the folly of unequal alliances is successfully ridiculed and exposed. This play was first represented in the presence of the court at Chambord. The king maintained during its performance an inscrutable physiognomy, which made it doubtful what might be his real sentiments respecting it. The same deportment was maintained by him during the evening toward the author, who was in attendance in his capacity of *valet de chambre*. The quick-eyed courtiers, the counts and marquises, who had so often smarted under the lash of the poet, construing this into an expression of royal disapprobation, were loud in their condemnation of him, and a certain duke boldly affirmed "that he was fast sinking into his second childhood, and that, unless some writer soon appeared, French comedy would degenerate into mere Italian farce." The unfortunate poet, unable to catch a single ray of consolation, was greatly depressed during the interval of five days which preceded the second representation of his piece; on returning from which, the monarch assured him that "none of his productions had afforded him greater entertainment, and that, if he had delayed expressing his opinion on the preceding

night, it was from the apprehension that his judgment might have been influenced by the excellence of the acting." Whatever we may think of this exhibition of royal caprice, we must admire the suppleness of the courtiers, one and all of whom straightway expressed their full conviction of the merits of the comedy, and the duke above mentioned added, in particular, that "there was a *vis comica* in all that Molière ever wrote, to which the ancients could furnish no parallel!" What exquisite studies for his pencil must Molière not have found in this precious assembly!

We have already remarked that the profession of a comedian was but lightly esteemed in France at this period. Molière experienced the inconveniences resulting from this circumstance even after his splendid literary career had given him undoubted claims to consideration. Most of our readers, no doubt, are acquainted with the anecdote of Belloc, an agreeable poet of the court, who on hearing one of the servants in the royal household refuse to aid the author of the *Tartuffe* in making the king's bed, courteously requested "the poet to accept his services for that purpose." Madame Campan's anecdote of a similar courtesy on the part of Louis the Fourteenth is also well known, who, when several of these functionaries refused to sit at table with the comedian, kindly invited him to sit down with him, and, calling in some of his principal courtiers, remarked that "he had requested the pleasure of Molière's company at his own table, as it was not thought quite good enough for his officers." This rebuke had the desired effect. However humiliating the reflection may be, that genius should have, at any time, stood in need of such patronage, it is highly honorable to the monarch who could raise himself so far above the prejudices of his age as to confer it.

It was the same unworthy prejudice that had so long excluded Molière from that great object and recompense of a French scholar's ambition,

a seat in the Academy; a body affecting to maintain a jealous watch over the national language and literature, which the author of the *Misanthrope* and the *Tartuffe*, perhaps more than any other individual of his age, had contributed to purify and advance. Sensbile of this merit, they at length offered him a place in their assembly, provided he would renounce his profession of a player, and confine himself in future to his literary labors. But the poet replied to his friend Boileau, the bearer of this communication, that "too many individuals of his company depended on his theatrical labors for support to allow him for a moment to think of it;" a reply of infinitely more service to his memory than all the academic honors that could have been heaped upon him. This illustrious body, however, a century after his decease, paid him the barren compliment (the only one then in their power) of decreeing to him an *éloge*, and of admitting his bust within their walls, with this inscription upon it:

"Nothing is wanting to his glory: he was wanting to ours."

The catalogue of Academicians contemporary with Molière, most of whom now rest in sweet oblivion, or, with Cotin and Chapelain, live only in the satires of Boileau, shows that it is as little in the power of academies to confer immortality on a writer as to deprive him of it.

We have not time to notice the excellent comedy of the *Femmes Savantes*, and some inferior pieces, written by our author at a later period of his life, and must hasten to the closing scene. He had been long affected by a pulmonary complaint, and it was only by severe temperance, as we have before stated, that he was enabled to preserve even a moderate degree of health. At the commencement of the year 1673, his malady sensibly increased. At this very season he composed his *Malade Imaginaire*—the most whimsical, and, perhaps, the most amusing of the compositions in which he has indulged his raillery against the faculty. On the seventeenth of February,

being the day appointed for its fourth representation, his friends would have dissuaded him from appearing in consequence of his increasing indisposition; but he persisted in his design, alleging "that more than fifty poor individuals depended for their daily bread on its performance." His life fell a sacrifice to his benevolence. The exertions which he was compelled to make in playing the principal part of *Argan* aggravated his distemper, and as he was repeating the word *juro* in the concluding ceremony, he fell into a convulsion, which he vainly endeavored to disguise from the spectators under a forced smile. He was immediately carried to his house in the *Rue de Richelieu,* now No. 34. A violent fit of coughing, on his arrival, occasioned the rupture of a blood-vessel; and seeing his end approaching, he sent for two ecclesiastics of the parish of St. Eustace, to which he belonged, to administer to him the last offices of religion. But these worthy persons refused their assistance; and before a third, who had been sent for, could arrive, Molière, suffocated with the effusion of blood, had expired in the arms of his family.

Harlay de Champvalon, at that time archbishop of Paris, refused the rites of sepulture to the deceased poet because he was a comedian, and had had the misfortune to die without receiving the sacraments. This prelate is conspicuous, even in the chronicles of that period, for his bold and infamous debaucheries. It is of him that Madame de Sévigné observes, in one of her letters: "There are two little inconveniences which make it difficult for any one to undertake his funeral oration —his life and his death." Father Gaillard, who at length consented to underake it, did so on the condition that he should not be required to say anything of the character of the deceased. The remonstrance of Louis the Fourteenth having induced this person to remove his interdict, he privately instructed the curate of St. Eustace not to allow the usual service for the dead to be recited at the interment. On the day appointed for this

ceremony, a number of the rabble assembled before the deceased poet's door, determined to oppose it. "They knew only," says Voltaire, "that Molière was a comedian, but did not know that he was a philosopher and a great man." They had, more probably, been collected together by the Tartuffes, his unforgiving enemies. The widow of the poet appeased these wretches by throwing money to them from the windows. In the evening, the body, escorted by a procession of about a hundred individuals, the friends and intimate acquaintances of the deceased poet, each of them bearing a flambeau in his hand, was quietly deposited in the cemetery of St. Joseph, without the ordinary chant, or service of any kind. It was not thus that Paris followed to the tomb the remains of her late distinguished comedian, Talma. Yet Talma was only a comedian, while Molière, in addition to this, had the merit of being the most eminent comic writer whom France had ever produced. The different degree of popular civilization which this difference of conduct indicates may afford a subject of contemplation by no means unpleasing to the philanthropist.

In the year 1792, during that memorable period in France when an affectation of reverence for their illustrious dead was strangely mingled with the persecution of the living, the Parisians resolved to exhume the remains of La Fontaine and Molière, in order to transport them to a more honorable place of interment. Of the relics thus obtained, it is certain that no portion belonged to La Fontaine, and it is extremely probable that none did to Molière. Whosoever they may have been, they did not receive the honors for which their repose had been disturbed. With the usual fickleness of the period, they were shamefully transferred from one place to another, or abandoned to neglect for seven years, when the patriotic conservator of the *Monumens Français* succeeded in obtaining them for his collection at the *Petits Augustins*. On the suppression of

this institution in 1817, the supposed ashes of the two poets were, for the last time, transported to the spacious cemetery of *Père de la Chaise*, where the tomb of the author of the *Tartuffe* is designated by an inscription in Latin, which, as if to complete the scandal of the proceedings, is grossly mistaken in the only fact which it pretends to record, namely, the age of the poet at the time of his decease.

Molière died soon after entering upon his fifty-second year. He is represented to have been somewhat above the middle stature, and well proportioned; his features large, his complexion dark, and his black, bushy eyebrows so flexible as to admit of his giving an infinitely comic expression to his physiognomy. He was the best actor of his own generation, and, by his counsels, formed the celebrated Baron, the best of the succeeding. He played all the range of his own characters, from *Alceste to Sganarelle*, though he seems to have been peculiarly fitted for broad comedy. He composed with rapidity, for which Boileau has happily complimented him:

> "Rare et sublime esprit, dont la fertile vein
> Ignore en écrivant le travail et la peine."

Unlike in this to Boileau himself, and to Racine, the former of whom taught the latter, if we may credit his son, "the art of rhyming with difficulty." Of course, the verses of Molière have neither the correctness nor the high finish of those of his two illustrious rivals.

He produced all his pieces, amounting to thirty, in the short space of fifteen years. He was in the habit of reading these to an old female domestic by the name of La Forêt, on whose unsophisticated judgment he greatly relied. On one occasion, when he attempted to impose upon her the production of a brother author, she plainly told him that he had never written it. Sir Walter Scott may have had this habit of Molière's in his mind when he introduced a similar expedient into his "Chronicles of the Canongate."

For the same reason, our poet used to request the comedians to bring their children with them when he recited a new play. The peculiar advantage of this humble criticism in dramatic compositions is obvious. Alfieri himself, as he informs us, did not disdain to resort to it.

Molière's income was very ample, probably not less than twenty-five or thirty thousand francs—an immense sum for that day—yet he left but little property. The expensive habits of his wife and his own liberality may account for it. One example of this is worth recording, as having been singularly opportune and well directed. When Racine came up to Paris as a young adventurer, he presented to Molière a copy of his first crude tragedy, long since buried in oblivion. The latter discerned in it, amid all its imperfections, the latent spark of dramatic genius, and he encouraged its author by the present of a hundred Louis. This was doing better for him than Corneille did, who advised the future author of *Phédre* to abandon the tragic walk, and to devote himself altogether to comedy. Racine recompensed this benefaction of his friend, at a later period of his life, by quarreling with him.

Molière was naturally of a reserved and taciturn temper, insomuch that his friend Boileau used to call him the *Contemplateur*. Strangers who had expected to recognize in his conversation the sallies of wit which distinguished his dramas, went away disappointed. The same thing is related of La Fontaine. The truth is, that Molière went into society as a spectator, not as an actor; he found there the studies for the characters which he was to transport upon the stage, and he occupied himself with observing them. The dreamer, La Fontaine, lived, too, in a world of his own creation. His friend, Madam de la Sablière, paid to him this untranslatable compliment: "En vérité, mon cher La Fontaine, vous seriez bien bête, si vous n'aviez pas tant d'esprit." These unseasonable reveries brought him, it may be imagined, into many whimsical adventures. The great Corneille, too, was

distinguished by the same apathy. A gentleman dined at the same table with him for six months without suspecting the author of the "Cid."

The literary reputation of Molière, and his amiable personal endowments, naturally led him into an intimacy with the most eminent wits of the golden age in which he lived; but especially with Boileau, La Fontaine, and Racine; and the confidential intercourse of these great minds, and their frequent *réunions* for the purposes of social pleasure, bring to mind the similar associations at *the Mermaid's*, *Will's Coffee-House*, and *Button's* which form so pleasing a picture in the annals of English literature. It was common on these occasions to have a volume of the unfortunate Chapelain's epic, then in popular repute, lie open upon the table, and if one of the party fell into a grammatical blunder, to impose upon him the reading of some fifteen or twenty verses of it: "a whole page," says Louis Racine, "was sentence of death." La Fontaine, in his *Psyché*, has painted his reminiscences of these happy meetings in the coloring of fond regret; where, "freely discussing such topics of literature or personal gossip as might arise, they touched lightly upon all, like bees passing on from flower to flower, criticising the works of others without envy, and of one another, when any one chanced to fall into the malady of the age, with frankness." Alas! that so rare a union of minds, destined to live together through all ages, should have been dissolved by the petty jealousies incident to common men.

In these assemblies frequent mention is made of Chapelle, the most intimate friend of Molière, whose agreeable verses are read with pleasure in our day, and whose cordial manners and sprightly conversation made him the delight of his own. His mercurial spirits, however, led him into too free an indulgence of convivial pleasures, and brought upon him the repeated, though unavailing remonstrances of his friends. On one of these occasions, as Boileau was urging upon him the impropriety of this indulgence, and its inevitable consequences,

Chapelle, who received the admonition with great contrition, invited his Mentor to withdraw from the public street in which they were then walking into a neighboring house, where they could talk over the matter with less interruption. Here wine was called for, and, in the warmth of discussion, a second bottle being soon followed by a third, both parties at length found themselves in a condition which made it advisable to adjourn the lecture to a more fitting occasion.

Molière enjoyed also the closest intimacy with the great Condé, the most distinguished ornament of the court of Louis the Fourteenth; to such an extent, indeed, that the latter directed that the poet should never be refused admission to him, at whatever hour he might choose to pay his visit. His regard for his friend was testified by his remark, rather more candid than courteous, to an abbé of his acquaintance, who had brought him an epitaph of his own writing upon the deceased poet. "Would to Heaven," said the prince, "that he were in a condition to bring me yours!"

We have already wandered beyond the limits which we had assigned to ourselves for an abstract of Molière's literary labors, and of the most interesting anecdotes in his biography. Without entering, therefore, into a criticism on his writings, of which the public stand in no need, we shall dismiss the subject with a few brief reflections on their probable influence, and on the design of the author in producing them.

The most distinguished French critics, with the overweening partiality in favor of their own nation, so natural and so universal, placing Molière by common consent at the head of their own comic writers, have also claimed for him a preëminence over those of every other age and country. A. W. Schlegel, a very competent judge in these matters, has degraded him, on the other hand, from the walks of high comedy to the writer of "buffoon farces, for which his genius and inclination seem to have essentially fitted him;" adding, moreover, that "his characters are not drawn from nature,

but from the fleeting and superficial forms of fashionable life." This is a hard sentence, accommodated to the more forcible illustration of the peculiar theory which the German writer has avowed throughout his work, and which, however reasonable in its first principles, has led him into as exaggerated an admiration of the romantic models which he prefers, as disparagement of the classical school which he detests. It is a sentence, moreover, upon which some eminent critics in his own country, who support his theory in the main, have taken the liberty to demur.

That a large proportion of Molière's pieces are conceived in a vein of broad, homely merriment, rather than in that of elevated comedy, abounding in forced situations, high caricature, and practical jokes; in the knavish, intriguing valets of Plautus and Terence; in a compound of that good-nature and irritability, shrewdness and credulity, which make up the dupes of Aristophanes, is very true; but that a writer, distinguished by his deep reflection, his pure taste, and nice observation of character, should have preferred this to the higher walks of his art, is absolutely incredible. He has furnished the best justification of himself in an apology, which a contemporary biographer reports him to have made to some one who censured him on this very ground: "If I wrote simply for fame," said he, "I should manage very differently; but I write for the support of my company. I must not address myself, therefore, to a few people of education, but to the mob. And this latter class of gentry take very little interest in a continued elevation of style and sentiment." With all these imperfections and lively absurdities, however, there is scarcely one of Molière's minor pieces which does not present us with traits of character that come home to every heart, and felicities of expression that, from their truth, have come to be proverbial.

With regard to the objection that his characters are not so much drawn from nature as from the local manners of the age, if it be meant that they

are not acted upon by those deep passions which engross the whole soul, and which, from its intensity, have more of a tragic than a comic import in them, but are rather drawn from the foibles and follies of ordinary life, it is true; but then these last are likely to be quite as permanent, and, among civilized nations, quite as universal as the former. And who has exposed them with greater freedom, or with a more potent ridicule than Molière? Love, under all its thousand circumstances, its quarrels, and reconciliations; vanity, humbly suing for admiration under the guise of modesty; whimsical contradiction of profession and habitual practice; the industry with which the lower classes ape, not the virtues, but the follies of their superiors; the affectation of fashion, taste, science, or anything but what the party actually possesses; the *esprit de corps*, which leads us to feel an exalted respect for our own profession, and a sovereign contempt for every other; the friendly adviser, who has an eye to his own interest; the author, who seeks your candid opinion, and quarrels with you when you have given it; the fair friend, who kindly sacrifices your reputation for a jest; the hypocrite, under every aspect, who deceives the world or himself—these form the various motley panorama of character which Molière has transferred to his canvas, and which, though mostly drawn from cultivated life, must endure as long as society shall hold together.

Indeed, Molière seems to have possessed all the essential requisites for excelling in genteel comedy: a pure taste, an acute perception of the ridiculous, the tone of elegant dialogue, and a wit brilliant and untiring as Congreve's, but which, instead of wasting itself like his, in idle flashes of merriment, is uniformly directed with a moral or philosophical aim. This obvious didactic purpose, in truth, has been censured as inconsistent with the spirit of the drama, and as belonging rather to satire; but it secured to him an influence over the literature and the opinions of his own generation which has been possessed by no other comic writer of the moderns.

He was the first to recall his countrymen from the vapid hyperbole and puerile conceits of the ancient farces, and to instruct them in the maxim which Boileau has since condensed into a memorable verse, that "nothing is beautiful but what is natural." We have already spoken of the reformation which one of his early pieces effected in the admirers of the *Hôtel de Rambouillet* and its absurdities; and when this confederacy afterward rallied under an affectation of science, as it had before done of letters, he again broke it with his admirable satire of the *Femmes Savantes*. We do not recollect any similar revolution effected by a single effort of genius, unless it be that brought about by the *Baviad* and *Mæviad*. But Mr. Gifford, in the Della-Cruscan school, but "broke a butterfly upon the wheel," in comparison with those enemies, formidable by rank and talent, whom Molière assailed. We have noticed, in its proper place, the influence which his writings had in compelling the medical faculty of his day to lay aside the affected deportment, technical jargon, and other mummeries then in vogue, by means of the public derision to which he had deservedly exposed them. In the same manner, he so successfully ridiculed the miserable dialectics, pedantry, and intolerance of the schoolmen, in his diverting dialogues between *Dr. Marphurius* and *Dr. Pancrace*, that he is said to have completely defeated the serious efforts of the University for obtaining a confirmation of the decree of 1624, which had actually prohibited, *under pain of death*, the promulgation of any opinion contrary to the doctrines of Aristotle. The *arrêt burlesque* of his friend Boileau, at a later period, if we may trust the *Menagiana*, had a principal share in preventing a decree of the Parliament against the philosophy of Descartes. It is difficult to estimate the influence of our poet's satire on the state of society in general, and on those higher ranks in particular whose affectations and pretensions he assailed with such pertinacious hostility. If he did not reform them, he at least deprived them of their fascination

and much of their mischievous influence, by holding them up to the contempt and laughter of the public. Sometimes, it must be admitted, though very rarely, in effecting this object, he so far transgressed the bounds of decorum as to descend even to personalities.

From this view of the didactic purpose proposed by Molière in his comedies, it is obviously difficult to institute a comparison between them and those of our English dramatists, or, rather, of Shakspeare, who may be taken as their representative. The latter seems to have had no higher end in view than mere amusement; he took a leaf out of the great volume of human nature as he might find it; nor did he accommodate it to the illustration of any moral or literary theorem. The former, on the other hand, manifests such a direct perceptive purpose as to give to some of his pieces the appearance of satires rather than of comedies; argument takes place of action, and the *pro* and *con* of the matter are discussed with all the formality of a school exercise. This essentially diminishes the interest of some of his best plays, the *Misanthrope* and the *Femmes Savantes*, for example, which for this reason seem better fitted for the closet than the stage, and have long since ceased to be favorites with the public. This want of interest is, moreover, aggravated by the barrenness of action visible in many of Molière's comedies, where he seems only to have sought an apology for bringing together his *coteries* of gentlemen and ladies for the purpose of exhibiting their gladiatorial dexterity in conversation. Not so with the English dramatist, whose boundless invention crowds his scene with incidents that hurry us along with breathless interest, but which sadly scandalize the lover of the unities.

In conformity with his general plan, too, Shakspeare brings before us every variety of situation—the court, the camp, and the cloister; the busy hum of populous cities, or the wild solitude of the forest—presenting us with pictures of rich and romantic beauty, which could not fall within the

scope of his rival, and allowing himself to indulge in the unbounded revelry of an imagination which Molière did not possess. The latter, on the other hand an attentive observer of man as he is found in an over-refined state of society, in courts and crowded capitals, copied his minutest lineaments with a precision that gives to his most general sketches the air almost of personal portraits; seasoning, moreover, his discourses with shrewd hints and maxims of worldly policy. Shakspeare's genius led him rather to deal in bold touches than in this nice delineation. He describes classes rather than individuals; he touches the springs of the most intense passions. The daring of ambition, the craving of revenge, the deep tenderness of love, are all materials in his hands for comedy, and this gives to some of his admired pieces—his "Merchant of Venice" and his "Measure for Measure," for example—a solemnity of coloring that leaves them only to be distinguished from tragedy by their more fortunate termination. Molière, on the contrary, sedulously excludes from his plays whatever can impair their comic interest. And when, as he has done very rarely, he aims directly at vice instead of folly (in the *Tartuffe* for instance), he studies to exhibit it under such ludicrous points of view as shall excite the derision rather than the indignation of his audience.

But whatever be the comparative merits of these great masters, each must be allowed to have attained complete success in his way. Comedy, in the hands of Shakspeare, exhibits to us man, not only as he is moved by the petty vanities of life, but by deep and tumultuous passion; in situations which it requires all the invention of the poet to devise and the richest coloring of eloquence to depict. But if the object of comedy, as has been said, be "to correct the follies of the age, by exposing them to ridicule," who then has equalled Molière?

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